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ABSTRACT

There is no clear consensus of the term "learner-centered reform." Learner-centered reform has become by implication either the cause or the consequence of inflated grades, lowered admission requirements, affirmative action, elimination of language and other requirements, student evaluation of teaching, abandonment of research, and many other ills that afflict the contemporary academy. It is fair to assume that most students attending truly nontraditional institutions probably would not be enrolled at all if only the traditional options existed. Some valid cause for concern about learner-centered reform stems from the consumer protection movement. There is growing concern in this area for external and nontraditional degree programs. There is also growing concern about accreditation. There is a threat posed by learner-centered reform to scholars and teachers of the traditional mold. If the influence of the learner in shaping the curriculum and evaluating his performance expands, it must be at the expense of the instructor. One positive step would be to integrate nontraditional programs more fully into the total fabric of the institution. The potential for consortia and other interinstitutional arrangements for facilitating nontraditional study has barely been tapped. Consortia could also serve to distribute, and thus minimize, the costs of responding to new student demands and interests. (Author/PG)

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LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION*

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Learner-centered reform is in difficulty. The problems are not confined to the United States. Take, for example, the recent controversy at the Vincennes branch of the University of Paris. This new campus opened shortly after the student uprising of the late 1960's, and was designed to expand non-traditional learning opportunities for working class youth. Enrollment grew rapidly, in part through admission of students who could not pass the difficult French baccalaureate exams. The curriculum was rather eclectic, and apparently quite popular with the students. But the Ministry of Education frowned upon the new campus. Last November the Ministry ordered Vincennes to stop awarding two year degrees to students who entered without passing the baccalaureate exam, but the University refused to comply. Last month a French national magazine carried a sensational story about a course in "sexology", which featured slides from the San Francisco erotic museum. The magazine article was followed quickly by a national television expose of the course. At this point the Ministry announced that the course was being "suspended" -- though in fact it was being offered on a non-credit basis anyway. Further investigations are planned. Although the campus has not yet been closed, one experiment in non-traditional education appears at least to be in jeopardy.

The Vincennes incident may sound remote to those concerned about learner-centered reform in the United States. Yet there are striking parallels -- both in the vulnerability of non-traditional curricula and in the readiness of the critics to equate various educational trends they fear or disapprove. The Vincennes problem is in fact quite close to home, even if the American scenario is slightly different.

It is hard to define what we mean by "learner centered reform." There is no clear consensus on the scope of the term. There exists a broad continuum of educational programs from the most to the least traditional, the most tightly to the most loosely structured, the most teacher-centered to the most learner centered. The lack of clarity about concepts and definitions is in fact part of the very problem with which we are concerned, for it has contributed to the vulnerability of innovation. Perhaps we simply know it when we see it, even if we cannot define it precisely.

If learner-centered reforms have found favor with federal agencies and national foundations, they have fared less well with the higher education establishment in Cambridge, New Haven, Palo Alto, Hyde Park and Morningside Heights. It is from this other establishment that the harshest criticism has recently come. Let me share with you a few examples. About a year ago Yale historian C. Vann Woodward addressed some 70 senior scholars at a conference sponsored by the International Council on the Future of the University. His message was highly significant, although the Chronicle of Higher Education apparently did not report it. Woodward lamented certain recent trends -- inflation of grades, relaxation or abandonment of language and other requirements, and then warned: "We have been the curriculum trivialized and vulgarized,

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and made relevant, and these are part of the legacy of the late nineteen sixties." Note carefully -- in the language of a profound and sensitive scholar -- the juxtaposition of these phenomena: making the curriculum more "relevant" is linked with making it "trivial" and "vulgar."

Nearly a year later appeared the double issue of Daedalus, serving as a final report for the Assembly on University Goals and Governance. Since I was Counsel to the Assembly in its initial years, I take quite seriously its findings and conclusions. The theme of the Daedalus report was "American Higher Education: Toward an Uncertain Future." Let me cite three alarming passages from the 80-some essays by major scholars and University administrators. First there is the statement of Columbia University Philosopher Charles Frankel:

Consider the following phenomena: grade inflation; the progressive elimination of foreign-language requirements from the curricula; the steady dilution of even mild distribution requirements; the regularity with which curricula reforms turn out to involve simply less reading and writing; the living conditions in dormitories from which universities have almost entirely withdrawn their supervisory authority although they continue to pay the bills; the double talk about quotas that are not quotas and apartheid that is not apartheid.

Next we find corroboration from Gordon Craig, Chairman of the History Department at Stanford, who echoes Frankel's dismay:

The insistence of the young, during the late 1960's, that the university establishment did not understand them and their world found an all too eager agreement on the part of faculty members who should have known better. Suddenly the cry of relevance filled the land; curricular requirements were heedlessly jettisoned because someone said that they prevented the investigation of the real problems that confronted our society. We entered the age of the Green Stamp University, in which the student receives the same number of stamps for a course on Bay Area Pollution or Human Sexuality as he does for American History or The Greek Philosophers, sticks them happily into his book, and gets a diploma when it is filled. Whether he has received an education in the course of all this is doubtful.

Let me take a final comment from the Daedalus symposium -- this from Allan Bloom, an American trained political scientist who now teaches at the University of Toronto:

Connected with [the] new radical egalitarianism in the university were the abandonment of requirements, the demand for student participation in all functions of the university, the evaluation of professors by students, sex counseling, the renouncing of standards because they encourage discrimination and unhealthy competition, a continuing inflation of grades, concentration on teaching rather than scholarship, open admissions, the introduction of new programs to fit every wish, and quotas in the admission of students and the hiring of faculty. It is questionable whether a university can pursue its proper end if it must be engaged in the fight against social inequality.

All four of these critics -- Woodward, Frankel, Craig and Bloom -- tend to assimilate many diverse trends they dislike and perhaps fear. Learner-centered reform becomes

by implication either the cause or the consequence of inflated grades, lowered admission requirements, affirmative action, elimination of language and other requirements, student evaluation of teaching, abandonment of research, and many other ills that afflict the contemporary academy. If one seeks a scapegoat for what he feels is wrong with higher education, this seems to be the most vulnerable point.

Obviously there are answers to such criticism. One could argue, for example, that most of the target reforms have occurred in traditional curricula at traditional universities, and many have been accepted by otherwise rather conservative faculties. In fact, non-traditional options existed long before there was a Minnesota Metro, an Empire State, or a Ferris State. Harvard's Junior Fellow program is a notable example. Its popularity in the 1930's explains why such scholars as McGeorge Bundy and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., hold no earned graduate degrees. One could also point to Yale's Scholars of the House program which allowed Yale seniors from the early 1950's to pursue independent study for a full semester of credit without any formal course requirements. Most especially could one remind today's critics of the Hutchins curriculum at the University of Chicago -- although even today that avenue of reform may still be controversial. Or take the matter of student evaluation of teaching, a subject of much modern concern in traditional academic circles. At least twenty five years ago the Harvard Crimson Confidential Guide was well established (and generally accepted by the faculty) as a student rating survey, and was followed a decade later by the Berkeley SLATE Supplement. Of course these examples are drawn from highly selective institutions, somewhat different from those that are leading today's non-traditional reforms. But the principle is clear: learner-centered reform was not simply a product of the student disorder of the late '60's or the malaise of the '70's.

Given this background, the intensity of current attack is all the more surprising. We must probe deeper for explanations. Paradoxically, it may be that criticism by the traditionalists reflects both the triumphs and the limitations of learner-centered reform. On one hand, the critics are genuinely perplexed by what they see -- and with some justification. Yet at the same time they may wish they could play a greater role in the very movement that generates their anxiety. Learner-centered reform is both alluring and somewhat frightening to a professor who has devoted his life to laboratory research and fifty minute lectures. There is as much ambivalence as there is anger.

Learner-centered reform has obviously created some of its problems by its very successes, even in traditional areas. Some of the harshest criticism comes from those disciplines in which enrollment declines have been most marked. It is not only in the modern languages that changing student interest has hurt, although the situation there is particularly acute. (A recent survey taken by the Modern Language Association reports that the percentage of colleges and universities requiring foreign language study dropped from 88.9% in 1965 to 56% in the fall of 1974.) Meanwhile the critics see enrollments rising at the non-traditional campuses. They suspect that external degree programs are stealing students who would be enrolled within walls if they could not matriculate without walls. The traditionalists may also be a bit envious of the favor with which the major foundations and such federal agencies as FIPSE and NIE have smiled upon the nontraditional programs. Yet the sense of competition may be largely illusory. Empire State probably draws their students away from Columbia and NYU -- at both of which, by the way, applications are up this year; Minnesota Metro has not grown at the expense either of the University of Minnesota or at Macalester; and Ferris State does not really undercut either Western Michigan or

Kalamazoo. While we have no good national data, it is a fair guess that most students attending truly non-traditional institutions probably would not be enrolled at all if only the traditional options existed. In fact, the opening of innovative and learner-centered curricula at traditional campuses has probably helped to increase or stabilize enrollments. The steady growth of part time students at most major universities, demonstrates the value of more flexible options for the established as well as the newer sectors.

This much about learner-centered reform is sound and good, and is either misunderstood or possibly envied by many of the traditional critics. At the same time, they do have valid cause for concern. Any fair assessment of the case must include some mention of the limitations and failures as well as the accomplishments. In fact, several very recent developments appear to validate the harshest criticism. Few disclosures could have done more harm to the public reputation and stature of learner-centered reform than the two academic scandals of recent weeks -- the one involving Lincoln Open University, the other the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. While these two incidents could be dismissed as more bizarre than representative, the institutions and people implicated by them had played a major part in the recent reform movement. The damage done by the embarrassment of Dwight Allen and the IED can hardly be minimized. Any such disclosures make much more difficult the task of convincing not only the skeptics but also the uncommitted that non-traditional programs are still respectable.

Then there is the whole consumer protection movement, which has recently spilled over into higher education. While the initial target is marginal vocational schools and proprietary institutions that have lured students with exaggerated claims, there is growing concern about the status of external and non-traditional degree programs. George Armstein, Executive Director of the National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, has recently pointed out that "legitimate ventures such as a 'university without walls' can in many cases look uncomfortably like a diploma mill." Meanwhile, a growing number of state governments have become concerned about itinerant external degree programs that maintain little contact with or supervision by out of state universities that may have marginal status even at home. Coordinating boards in New York, Texas, Minnesota and Ohio, among others, have begun to impose stricter controls on the entry of such nonresident institutions offering courses and degrees to their residents. (The motives of such agencies may not be entirely pure, or their concern solely qualitative. In a time of increasing competition for students, incursions by out of state institutions -- regardless of their academic standing -- clearly threaten local colleges and universities fighting for survival.)

There is also growing concern about accreditation. Several of the regional associations have been receptive to external degrees. North Central has recently accredited the graduate degrees of the Union of Experimenting Colleges and Universities, and earlier gave its blessing to such institutions as Minnesota Metro, Governors State and Sangamon State. The Southern Regional Association has reformulated some of its accrediting standards after surveying nontraditional programs at member institutions. The Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions two years ago developed and widely circulated an Interim Statement on Accreditation and Nontraditional Study, which gave major impetus to developments in other parts of the country. But there remains the uncertain role of the professional and specialized accrediting bodies. As the report of the Commission on Nontraditional Study warned: "Their work is heavily guided by reliance on structural and operational standards: many of them are

highly specific, and some of them seem to outsiders to be incapable of defense on any rational basis . . . To such agencies, the idea of non-traditional study and particularly of the external degree is likely to appear to be the reemergence of an old enemy." One has only to recall the inordinate difficulty gaining Law School Association approval for Northeastern University's heavily clinical cooperative program to appreciate the depth of this concern. Non-traditional study could certainly use more friends in this quarter if it is to prosper.

We should not minimize the genuine threat posed by learner-centered reform to scholars and teachers of the traditional mold. If the influence of the learner in shaping the curriculum and evaluating his performance expands, it must be at the expense of the instructor. The authority of the faculty member in the teaching-learning relationship -- already threatened by grading reforms, abolition of requirements and relaxation of class attendance rules -- may seem to be undermined more dramatically by the newer reforms. If the results lack consistency, and in some cases lack even academic substance, the dismay of the senior professoriate is not surprising. As non-traditional programs expand, excesses and abuses are bound to occur, or at least to be visible, more often than in traditional programs. Maintenance of standards is harder in external and competency based programs than in fifty minute classes with papers, exams and quarterly grades. Thus there is some substance to what the Craigs, the Woodwards, the Frankels and the Blooms are saying about the erosion not only of values but of academic authority as well. Their words simply must be heeded.

There must be ways of meeting this criticism more effectively than has been done to date. We should at least be able to persuade conscientious critics that higher grades, lower standards, student apathy and faculty malaise cannot all fairly be attributed to curricular innovation. Let me now suggest several steps that might be taken to bridge a widening gulf that now jeopardizes learner-centered reform.

First, several approaches might be taken at the individual college or campus level. One positive step would be to integrate the non-traditional units and programs more fully into the total fabric of the institution. Such programs have often been isolated, both geographically and administratively, from the campus center. As a result, non-traditional thinking fails to reach the bulk of the faculty and students; to the extent they feel any need to innovate they console themselves that "we already have an experimental college" or "the extension division grants experiential credit."

For similar reasons, it would be helpful to provide even modest institutional support for innovative programs within the traditional units -- new experiential or competency based options in the College of Arts and Sciences, for example -- rather than confining support of reform to the already committed colleges or schools. Administrators at traditional campuses could do much to foster understanding of non-traditional curricula -- and hopefully allay fears or correct misconceptions -- by sponsoring faculty forums to which traditionalists as well as innovators would be invited. Such forums could provide the kind of bridge that is now clearly lacking and is badly needed. Finally at the individual campus level, much could be done by establishing the relationship between learner-centered reform and faculty development in the traditional fields that are most threatened by enrollment declines and shifting student demands. (Here I might borrow an example from my own University. Two years ago our foreign language departments began to work with the College of Business

Administration to develop a most imaginative international business option. This program meets a nationally growing career demand, which is reflected in strong student interest. As a result of this and similar innovations, our modern language requirement has survived and the enrollment in upper division language courses has actually increased.) Faculty members in the language area have expanded their horizons while their counterparts in other universities face a deepening depression.

Let us move from the campus to the region. The potential of consortia and other interinstitutional arrangements for facilitating nontraditional study has barely been tapped. At one level, of course, there is the model of an interinstitutional degree such as that offered by the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities. But consortia may aid learner-centered reform in other ways as well. As student interests change, a group of institutions can far better respond to such changes -- with far less internal dislocation -- than can the single campus. The opportunities for curricular enrichment through cross registration and exchange of faculty offer more flexibility in meeting student needs than any one institution can muster. (Again I take a page from our own book. The Greater Cincinnati Consortium is now developing multi-institutional options in Women's Studies, Gerontology, and Judaic Studies. No one member of the Consortium could muster such strength alone, but working together they have been able to offer a rich variety of complementary courses.)

Consortia also serve to distribute, and thus minimize, the costs of responding to new student demands and interests. A consortium-based media center or broadcasting facility may be feasible at times when no single institution could shoulder the cost alone. If student interest in the field flags, all members of the consortium share the consequences and perhaps, by working together, can find an alternative use for the equipment or facility. Here, too, the opportunity for interinstitutional collaboration seems responsive to some concerns of the critics -- although, in fact, some of these critics are no more sanguine about interinstitutional cooperation than about non-traditional education.

Finally, let us look to the national scene. It is here that the major missionary work must be done. As a first step there is an immediate need to articulate more clearly and explain better the available models for learner-centered reform. Even granting that educational innovation must be eclectic and result-oriented, there does seem to have been too much doing and not enough thinking in these past few years. We are fortunate to have had the views of the Commission on Nontraditional Study. But we need more such analysis and evaluation, and we need it in a form that will make clearer to traditional faculties the potential new opportunities for creative teaching and research. Fears and anxieties must be dealt with directly and with reasoned, careful, and scholarly responses of a kind that have been too rare in the past.

At the national level, those who are committed to the cause of learner-centered reform have also tended to talk too much to themselves and not enough to those who are fearful, skeptical, or simply ignorant about non-traditional programs. The annual meetings of this Association might provide a forum for dialogue between these groups, rather than simply for reaffirmation among the faithful. Next year the speaker at such a session as this one might be a Charles Frankel, a Gordon Craig or a C. Vann Woodward speaking directly rather than through an intermediary. It is vital that a group such as this one hear directly from the critics why they are concerned, and that we respond both defensively and constructively to the criticisms that divide the two major academic camps.

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Our work at the national level should also reach into the accrediting associations -- not merely the rational groups which have been receptive, but the specialized, professional and disciplinary organizations where feelings are far less sympathetic. We have friends in these groups, but they are probably far outnumbered by those who are (or think they are) enemies of non-traditional study. It is these groups we need to reach before attitudes harden and lines become drawn in ways that may take decades to soften. Frankel, Woodward, Craig and Bloom are not alone. Nor are they all wrong. They are genuinely concerned and alarmed about developments they believe deeply detrimental to American higher education as they value it. They need and deserve better answers than they have received to date.